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Caste: Fission and Fusion

Robert L Hardgrave, Jr

The definition of caste has come increasingly into dispute. Its identification with a closed stratification system forming an organic whole is being questioned. The observed process of fission and fusion has broken down castes into new endogamous sub-units and there has been at the same time amalgamation of analogous castes for the acquisition of social and political influence.

Various levels of segmentation within caste are meaningful for different purposes and activities and the basis of segmentation itself varies greatly from one unit to another. The prominence of class segments within the caste provides for much greater mobility than the earlier sub-castes.

Caste, as a primordial tie, persists in the midst of change, retaining its traditional endogamy as the basic primary unit beyond the family. Class divisions assume increasing importance, however, and as class becomes more behaviourally decisive, the bounds of caste are crossed, linking comparable class segments across caste lines on the basis of common interests and associations.

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ANTHROPOLOGICAL studies of recent years in India have raised fundamental questions about the traditional understanding of caste. Indeed, the very definition of *caste* has come increasingly into serious dispute. The difficulty of defining caste has always been evident, as Hutton noted more than twenty years ago,¹ but there was at least considerable agreement on certain characteristic features of the caste system. It was seen as a closed stratification system, in which the various castes (*jati*), each symbolically related to the other within the framework of *varna*, formed an organic whole. Ranked hierarchically on a scale of ritual purity, each caste enjoyed differential access to religious privilege and civil rights. The caste unit was regarded as normally endogamous, commensally exclusive, and characterised by a hereditary craft or occupation. Caste mobility was restricted; individual mobility non-existent.

In the compilation of the gazetteers and in the enumeration of the census in nineteenth century India, it became obvious that this model of the caste system was not wholly congruent with reality — that, in fact, the system was considerably less rigid than suggested by the ideal type. Caste was seen to have a certain “resiliency”, an ability to flexibly adapt to its changing environment. This resilience was manifest, for example, in the considerable variations in caste ranking from region to region, reflecting significant mobility within the middle range of castes in a given situation. It was manifest also in the processes of fission and fusion within the system. Caste was not only characterised by the “fissiparous tendency” to break down into new endogamous sub-units, a phenomenon long

recognised, but a supposedly new tendency was observed: “the amalgamation of analogous castes with a view to the exercise of social and political influence”.² These larger, amalgamated bodies, represented by the caste associations, have been regarded, on the one hand, as an adaptive response to the modern conditions of pluralist democracy,³ and, on the other, as corporate bodies, which by their competitive nature, act “in defiance of caste principles”.⁴

Richard Fox, writing in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, states that “there is an intrinsic organisational difference between traditional caste structure and the relatively recent caste associations which have grown up in response to modern Indian conditions”.⁵ F G Bailey agrees. Caste, he says, “allows for co-operation, but not competition. We might distinguish here between caste as ‘organic stratification’ and class as ‘segmentary stratification’. Thus, caste in India is ‘closed organic stratification’”.⁶

FOUR REFERENTS

Bailey distinguishes four referents of “caste” in India. The first is *varna*, the classical division of Vedic society. The second is what he calls “caste categories” — “aggregates of persons, usually in the same linguistic region, usually with the same traditional occupation, and sometimes with the same caste name”. The third is the caste association, the voluntary group which draws its membership from the ascriptive reservoir of traditional caste: it is “exclusive but not exhaustive”. The fourth referent is *jati*, characterised by a system of segregation, interdependence, and hierarchy.⁷ These qualities correspond to what Bailey describes

later as the structural features of the caste system: (a) birth ascription, i.e., closed stratification; (b) co-operation, not competition; and (c) the summation of roles.⁸

Clearly there is some structural relationship between the four referents, but this remains largely unspecified. With regard to the aspect of segregation of *jati* Bailey writes, for example, that “in the field of interaction there is a complete break between one caste and another in kinship”.⁹ Yet, beyond the “specific links of actual kinship”, he refers to “the recognition of potential links” and also to “a general ‘sentiment’ of kinship, for it is this”, he says, “which also underlies recruitment to caste associations and which underwrites the quasi-group characteristics of caste categories”.¹⁰ This “sentiment” involves “some vague sense of common heritage”, but there are restrictions on marriage across caste lines within the category — what Bailey calls “a form of negative interaction”.¹¹ In modern India, however, a process of fusion has broken the barriers of endogamy: “What were formerly caste categories are becoming groups”,¹² Bailey says, but he does not explain how or why the phenomenon has occurred, except to imply that it is somehow related to the emergence of “a few large political arenas”.¹³ The system, Bailey argues, “is now tending to be not organic, but segmentary”.¹⁴ This suggests that fusion is a new phenomenon and that in the traditional system, competition between castes did not exist. To endow the past with a reality congruent with the ideal type of the closed organic stratification model, however, may involve dangerous deification. It assumes, I fear, a

far too rigid view of traditional caste and does not, in any case, account for the relationship between the individual *jati* and the "caste categories".

The caste association is clearly a modern creation — and has been both the product and the agent of caste fusion within the over-arching caste category. The caste association, while representing the amalgamated caste grouping, in fact has an extremely limited membership. The Nadar Mahajana Sangam in Tamilnad, for example, is one of the largest and most successful caste associations in India — yet its actual membership is only a little more than 20,000. The Nadars, however, number approximately 16,50,000. "Caste associations", Bailey admits, "are not strata in the strict sense, since by no means everyone belongs to such an association".¹⁵ At the same time, Bailey seems to equate the narrowness of the association with the caste category. The traditional system of *jati* in the village, he suggests, remains essentially intact. The structural criteria of exclusiveness, exhaustiveness, and closed recruitment "still hold unambiguously in the village".¹⁶

CONTINUITY OF CASTE SENTIMENT

Fox says the same thing with regard to the Umars of Uttar Pradesh: "The trend of the last 40 years, then, has been for the separate castes with the Umar caste category to approach a group structure. But", he continues, "it is important to note the manner in which the new Umar corporateness is expressed. It does not take the form of a single endogamous, commensal unit; for the most part, such localised attributes remain as strong as before."¹⁷ In his analysis of the Umars, Fox argues that the demise of their traditional organisation, the *tat*, began about 20 years ago under the influence of the propaganda of the new Umar caste association. "What replaces the local Umar *tat panchayats* in a temporal sense, if not in the performance of their duties, is the All-India Umar Sabha — that large, heterogeneous body of what are in effect separate castes."¹⁸ Fox thus seems to deny that an actual fusion of *jati* has taken place, but rather that simply the effective traditional organisational units have declined, and that a caste association, claiming virtual representation for the caste category, has entered into conflict with other communities. "The

Umar data would thus conform", Fox asserts, "Leach's opinion that when castes enter into (political) competition, they are no longer organised as castes."¹⁹ Why the data are really necessary is not clear, for such a conclusion is the inevitable consequence of a definition of caste which precludes even the possibility of conflict among castes.

In arguing that caste organisation has succumbed to social change, Fox states that while the caste system has not been resilient, the sentiment of "casteism" has persisted. "To discuss caste change or resilience meaningfully", he says, "one must look to all retention or loss of organisational forms, not the maintenance of sentiments."²⁰ Organisation and sentiment, however, while analytically separate, are not as empirically distinct as Fox suggests, for sentiment provides the framework for organisational change, for the emergence of new organisational forms in, for example, a redefinition of the units of endogamy.

It is indeed clear that there is in sentiment a fundamental continuity between the various referents of caste. Andre Beteille observes that "the word *jati* is used by Indians to refer to units of different levels of segmentation . . ." and that the meaning of the word shifts easily from one referent to another.²¹ Thus, the single term *jati* may refer to *varna*, the caste category, or the smallest unit of endogamy. Both Bailey and Fox refer to the link of sentiment between *jati* and the caste category and recognise either the actuality or possibility of the fusion of analogous *jati* into larger units of endogamy (although Fox is less clear on this).

The ambiguities in the usage of the word *jati* may reflect, as Beteille urges, the segmentary character of the caste system.²² The individual has a multiplicity of ascriptive "memberships" in a nesting system, and the term *jati* is applied to each level. Sentiment provides the framework for behaviour, but organised patterns of behaviour characterise each level. The various levels of segmentation are meaningful for different purposes and activities. For purposes of marriage, for example, the essential segment is the smallest unit of endogamy. In athletic competition at a village fair, however, the caste category is the more likely referent. To a significant degree, the caste category is viewed

from the outside as an undifferentiated group. The only exceptions might occur if there were radically different forms of behaviour between the endogamous units of the category. "On the whole", Adrian Mayer writes, caste membership is significant for relations with others castes, and sub-caste membership for relations with other castes, and sub-caste membership for activities within the caste."²³ Beteille argues effectively that "the fact that caste is a segmentary system means (and has always meant) that people view themselves as belonging to units of different orders in different contexts . . . There is no reason to believe this is a new phenomenon".²⁴

DISTINCTION WITHIN NADARS

In the caste system throughout India, there is considerable variation in the extent to which units of like order are segmented. The basis of segmentation also varies greatly from one unit to another. Segmentation, for example, may be on the basis of occupation, sect, territorial base, etc.²⁵ There is considerable disagreement over the basis of segmentation among the Nadars, or Shanars as the community was known in the nineteenth century, as to whether it was territorial, occupational, or of mythological or dynastic origin.²⁶ Most data supports the view that the five endogamous units within the category "Nadar" were concentrated in different parts of the southern districts of Madras. Each was also associated with a particular occupation. While the community as a whole was regarded from the outside as "toddy-tappers", there was significant occupational diversity within the community — although this represented more a division of labour in the cultivation of the palmyra palm. These five *jati* were traditionally endogamous, and while there were no commensal restrictions, each was ranked hierarchically within the Nadar category.

Four of these *jati* were relatively small, and it was within the largest of the *jati* that the most significant distinctions within the Nadar community were to be found. Although lacking the sanction of mythology, the unit was segmented into two basic and effectively endogamous groups: the climbers who extracted the juice from the palmyra and the Nadans, the "Lords of the Land", the aristocrats of

the community who held sway over the regions of Nadar concentration in Tinnevely. There were also traders within each of the Nadar *jati*.

In the early nineteenth century, as transportation facilities opened a wider area of trade, these Nadar merchants pushed north into Ramnad, the country of the Maravars. By the 1820s, they had established flourishing trade centres and, threatened by a potentially hostile Maravar majority, the Nadar traders created a tightly-knit organisation, the *uravinmurai*, for their protection and advancement. The distinctions of *jati* in the conflict situation of the Maravar country collapsed in the formation of a new endogamous unit: the traders of Ramnad now distinguished themselves altogether from the despised occupation of tapping.

Within Tinnevely itself, the basic division between the Nadans and the climbers persisted, but was complicated by the emergence of a new, largely endogamous group; the Christian converts. With economic change in the nineteenth century, the distinctions between the old *jati* were lost and the boundaries increasingly blurred as the unit of endogamy expanded and changed. Today only one of the old *jati*, the Nattattis, remains as a distinct entity. Most Nadars express now only the vaguest knowledge of these subdivisions within the community, unable even to name the one to which by tradition they would belong.

In the regions of Nadar dominance in Tinnevely, the community is still divided — but the functionally endogamous units of today reflect the emergence of new economic classes and functions within the caste. In Ramnad, on the other hand, the Nadars in conflict with other communities and with minimum differentiation among themselves created a solitary community.

The over-arching caste association, the Nadar Mahajana Sangam, was organised in 1910 for the unification and uplift of the community. Although the association has remained primarily an organisation of the Ramnad Nadars, the Sangam served to mobilise caste sentiment into action for educational and economic advancement and for access to political power. The very success of the community in fulfilling its aspirations accelerated internal differentiation and the formation of distinct class segments within the community. There emerged an in-

creasingly wide range of occupations and economic positions — from the toddy-tapper to the trader and businessman and the professional. Frequency of interaction was far greater in the unit of the class segment than in the caste as a whole, and marriage was almost wholly limited by its socio-economic boundaries.

These segments correspond to what Milton Gordon has called the *ethclass* in American society — “the sub-society created by the intersection of the vertical stratification of social class . . .”²⁷ According to Gordon, “each ethnic group may be thought of as being divided into sub-groups on the basis of social class, and that theoretically each ethnic group might conceivably have the whole spectrum of classes within it, although in practice, some ethnic groups will be found to contain only a partial distribution of social class sub-groups.”²⁸ This is what Hollingshead describes when he speaks of “the development of *parallel class structures* within the limits of race, ethnic origin, and religion.”²⁹

CLASS WITHIN CASTE

The ethnic group, Gordon states, “is the locus of a sense of *historical identification*, while the *ethclass* is the locus of a sense of *participational identification*.”³⁰ In a caste, the unit of endogamy will reflect the intersection of horizontal and vertical cleavages: marriage is almost wholly confined to the class segment of the caste. Thus, within the larger endogamy of the caste, or “caste category”, each class segment tends towards endogamy. The system, however, is characterised by fission and fusion. The process may be taken as a function of (1) differentiation or social distance between units of a category and (2) the degree of conflict between the caste category and other communities. Among the Nadars, the process may be observed in the breakdown of the major *jati* into the endogamous division of Nadan and climber; in the fusion of the small *jati* into the larger; the emergence of an endogamous trading group in Ramnad; and, more recently, in a stratification reflecting the spectrum of modern economic classes.

These class segments, unlike the earlier sub-castes, however, remain open, and within the caste, there is a high degree of mobility. In his study of the Tanjore Brahmins, Beteille ob-

serves that “Western education, urban residence and salaried employment not only serve to reduce the structural distance between different Brahmin castes but also create new divisions within each one of them . . . the effective unit of endogamy tends to be re-defined among them and in the process loses some of its traditional rigidity.”³¹

As the endogamous units of the caste category are redefined in the process of fission and fusion, the caste system itself undergoes significant change. With a high degree of differentiation between the caste and other communities, each class segment within the caste will be bound to the other in an “interdependence of fate”. With the decline of such differentiation, however, as other communities begin to distinguish interactionally between the class segments of the caste, the solidarity of the caste is broken. Caste, as a primordial tie, persists in the midst of change, retaining its traditional endogamy as the basic primary unit beyond the family. Class divisions assume increasing importance, however, and as class becomes more behaviourally decisive, the bounds of caste are crossed, linking comparable class segments across caste lines on the basis of common interests and associations.

The congruence of class and caste has provided the flavour of caste to Indian political life. In Kerala, for example, a region of intense caste activity in politics, the elaboration of caste ranking and the generally common economic position shared by members of a caste, together with the high correlation between caste rank and economic position, have given rise to a political situation in which the most significant actors appear to be castes and communities. These socio-political constellations, reflecting a superimposition of ritual rank, social status, and economic position, however, represent essentially a class orientation. The increasing economic differentiation within caste communities of Kerala, as among the Ezhava, has resulted in the dispersion of political loyalties.³²

If the social structure and political life of modern India is increasingly characterised by a class orientation, it reflects a movement towards a more open stratification system rather than the simple replacement of class over caste. It is not now, nor ever has it been, a question of either/or.

Notes

- 1 J H Hutton: "Caste in India", Cambridge University Press, 1946, p 42.
- 2 *Ibid*, p 45.
- 3 See Lloyd and Suzanne H Rudolph: "The Political Role of India's Caste Associations", *Pacific Affairs*, XXXIII, 1960, 15.
- 4 E R Leach: "Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North West Pakistan", Cambridge University Press, 1961, p 7.
- 5 Richard G Fox: "Resilience and Change in the Indian Caste System: The Umar of UP", *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXVI, 1967, p 575.
- 6 F G Bailey: "Closed Stratification in India", *Archives Europeennes de Sociologie*, IV, 1963, p 118.
- 7 *Ibid*, pp 107-08.
- 8 *Ibid*, pp 120-21.
- 9 *Ibid*, p 109.
- 10 *Ibid*.
- 11 *Ibid*, p 108.
- 12 *Ibid*, pp 121-22.
- 13 *Ibid*, p 121.
- 14 *Ibid*, p 123.
- 15 *Ibid*.
- 16 *Ibid*, p 122.
- 17 Fox, *op cit*, p 582.
- 18 *Ibid*, p 585.
- 19 *Ibid*, p 587.
- 20 *Ibid*.
- 21 Andre Beteille, "A Note on the Referents of Caste", *Archives Europeennes de Sociologie*, V, 1964, p 130.
- 22 *Ibid*, p 131.
- 23 Adrian C Mayer: "Caste and Kinship in Central India", Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960, p 159.
- 24 Beteille, *op cit*, p 133.
- 25 See Beteille, *op cit*, pp 131-32.
- 26 For a further discussion of organisation and change among the Nadars, see Robert L Hardgrave, Jr: "Varieties of Political Behaviour Among the Nadars of Tamilnad", *Asian Survey*, Vol VI, November, 1966, pp 614-21; "The Political Culture of a Community in Change: The Nadars of Tamilnad", University of California Press, forthcoming.
- 27 Milton M Gordon: "Assimilation in American Life", Oxford University Press, 1964, p 51.
- 28 *Ibid*, p 48.
- 29 August B Hollingshead: "Trends in Social Stratification: A Caste Study", *American Sociological Review*, XVII, December, 1952, p 686. Hollingshead's analysis of New Haven reveals that "the community's current social structure is differentiated vertically along racial, ethnic, and religious lines, and each of these vertical cleavages, in turn, is differentiated horizontally by a series of strata or classes that are encompassed within it . . . The horizontal strata that transect each of these vertical structures are based upon the social values that are attached to occupation, education, place of residence in the community, and association". *Ibid*, p 685.
- 30 Gordon, *op cit*, p 53.
- 31 Andre Beteille: "Closed and Open Social Stratification", *Archives Europeennes de Sociologie*, VII, 1966, 234-35.
- 32 Robert L Hardgrave, Jr: "Caste in Kerala: A Preface to the Elections", *Economic Weekly*, November 21, 1964, p 1847. Also see Hardgrave: "Caste and the Kerala Elections", *Economic Weekly*, April 17, 1965.



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